

Voices of Teachers on the New Normal Education among Selected Public Schools in Cotabato City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT: Education has been one of the most affected segments of the society in the arrival of the Corona Virus known as the COVID-19. The Global transference from the traditional face-to-face learning to blended modality such as online and modular instruction as an intervention measure has resulted to tremendous challenges in the educational sector. In terms of Modular Learning Modality, various terms and conditions need to be formulated and implemented specifically in the preparation, distribution, and retrieval as well as checking of Self Learning Modules (SLM's) to ensure quality education. To sustain this intervention, it has resulted to multifarious challenges. Hence, this study employed the qualitative research design specifically utilized the phenomenological research and explored the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Cotabato City Division in the implementation of Distance Learning particularly on the use of Modular Instruction in the new normal. The teacher participants were selected through purposive sampling and undertook one-on-one actual in-depth interview through video conferencing technique. The documented interviews were transcribed and coded as well as categories were clustered; eventually, emerging themes were extracted, analyzed and interpreted. Results revealed five major themes concerning the challenges faced by the teachers such as problems related to learning modules that include the preparation, production, distribution, retrieval and checking; communication problems with parents; monitoring the learners' performance; unstable internet connectivity; and lack of available resources. Findings identified the teachers' coping mechanisms to address these challenges which were divided into three categories such as skills that include motivational, mastery, transformational and life-long learning; attitudes that include broadmindedness, commitment, willingness to work and flexibility and adaptability; and teaching performance like efficiency and effectiveness, resourcefulness, persistency and tolerance, and innovation in teaching. The teachers' aspirations have taken into consideration the collaborative effort among the stakeholders viz, the Department of Education, school, community and the home. The strong partnership, unity and clear expectations of their duties and responsibilities in taking part in the implementation of education in the new normal play a very significant role in sustaining the delivery of quality educational services in the new normal education.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, coping mechanisms, distance learning, modular learning modality, new normal education, and phenomenology

I. INTRODUCTION

The inevitable rise on the use of Distance or Blended Learning in the Global Community is due to the birth of the COVID-19 pandemic that has dramatically affected the educational system. Beteille and Ding (2020) emphasized that the sudden closure of schools during COVID-19 has left many teachers across several countries uncertain about their role, unable to use technology effectively to communicate and teach, and unprepared for classroom challenges particularly in the opening of schools. The pandemic has brought the need to bridge digital divides into sharp focus, with countries and schools adept at using such technologies facing fewer challenges in meeting learning goals. There can be little doubt that high-quality education is a social experience, requiring routine human interface. Successful teachers are irreplaceable in this task—and will remain so in the foreseeable future—but they need to be supported in multiple ways to be effective in unpredictable circumstances.

Article XIV, Sections 1 and 2 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution states,

"The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels, and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all. The State shall establish, maintain and support a complete, adequate, and integrated system of education relevant to the needs of the people, and the society; and establish and maintain a system of free public education in the elementary and high school levels."

Relative to the constitutional mandate in upholding the right of all citizens to quality education at all times, the Department of Education (DepEd) has become steadfast in facing the demands of public emergency measures brought about by the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) was developed to ensure that learning opportunities are provided to the learners in a safe manner through the use of varied learning delivery modes observing resourcefulness and innovativeness (DepEd Order No. 018, s.2020).

As stipulated in the said order, the BE-LCP aims to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of the learners, teachers, and personnel in the time of the pandemic. Tibon (2020) reported that the learning delivery modalities that schools can adopt may be one or a combination of the following, depending on the local health conditions, the availability of resources, and the particular context of the learners in the school or locality. One of these is the face-to-face modality wherein the students and the teacher are both physically present in the classroom, and there are opportunities for active engagement, immediate feedback, and socio-emotional development of learners. Another modality is the distance learning wherein the learning takes place between the teacher and the learners who are geographically remote from each other during instruction. This modality has three types, namely: Modular Distance Learning, Online Distance Learning, and Television/Radio-Based Instruction. This is most viable for independent learners, and learners supported by periodic supervision of parents or guardians. The blended learning modality refers to a learning delivery that combines face-to-face with any, or a mix of, Modular Distance Learning, Online Distance Learning, and Television/Radio-Based Instruction. Blended learning will enable the schools to limit face-to-face learning, ensure social distancing, and decrease the volume of people outside the home at any given time. There is also a modality called homeschooling which aims to provide learners with quality basic education that is facilitated by qualified parents, guardians, or tutors who have undergone relevant training in a home-based environment.

Distance Learning has become the widespread intervention required by the DepEd to address the effects brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Learning Modalities used in Distance Learning or Blended Learning as prescribed by DepEd including the Online Learning, Offline Learning, TV/CATV Learning and Modular Learning. According to Llego (2020), Distance Learning refers to a learning delivery modality where learning takes place between the teacher and the learners who are geographically remote from each other during instruction. This modality has three types: Modular Distance Learning (MDL), Online Distance Learning (ODL), and TV/Radio-Based Instruction.

In the new normal education, the teachers are given the option to use a modality depending on what the medium for learning the students or pupils based on the learners' category. In the Category A, learners with internet connectivity are qualified to avail of the Online Instruction and any modalities the school offers. In the Category B, learners have mobile data using their cellphone and parents are willing to pay for the load of their internet data, learners are qualified for online data and other modalities required by the school. In the Category C, if the students have no internet but have their own laptop, computer TV/CATV, they are qualified for offline learning TV/CATV Learning and Modular Learning. In Category D, learners have no internet, no laptop nor computer but have TV/CATV, they are qualified for offline learning, TV/CATV and Modular Learning. In Category E, learners have no internet, no laptop and computer have LED Smart TV but no CATV, and students are qualified for Offline Learning and Modular Learning. In Category F, learners have no internet, no laptop and computer, no TV at home, learners are qualified for Modular Learning (Teacher Car, 2020).

Modular Distance Learning features individualized instruction that allows learners to use self-learning modules (SLMs) in print or digital format/electronic copy, whichever is applicable to the learner. Learners under Modular Distance Learning can also use other resources such as Learner's Materials, textbooks, activity sheets, study guides, and other study materials. Usually, teachers will have to deliver appropriate learning materials. However, students can also access these materials by downloading electronic copies through their computer, tablet PC, or smartphone. The teacher takes the responsibility of monitoring the progress of the learners. If possible, they will conduct home visits to check on each student's progress and performance (Malaya, 2020).

Given that the aforementioned nature of educational teaching and learning modalities has been newly implemented, the key purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers specifically digging deeper into the challenges and coping mechanisms of the teachers including their aspirations in the management of modular distance learning in the new normal education.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized the descriptive phenomenological approach as its research design which concentrated on exploring the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in Cotabato City Division in the implementation of Modular Instruction specifically in the new normal. The participants of the study were 20 elementary teachers, who were selected using the purposive sampling method. An interview with the teacher participants was scheduled based on their availability and convenience. The actual one-on-one, in-depth interview at an average of 20 minutes happened through FB Video Conferencing. Questions used were open ended to enable the participants to give answers in their own words. The conversations were recorded upon the participants' approval. The documented interviews were transcribed in verbatim. Optimistic and neutral analyses were employed in the treatment of data. The thematic analysis consisted of the participants' statements, phrases, and utterances relevant to the experienced phenomenon. These were the basis in the conduct of warm analysis in which the data were clustered and categorized. Emerging themes were derived from the highlighted terms. The researchers acted as the interviewers and documenters to make sure the data gathered were well documented and objectively analyzed. Likewise, the study utilized the Thematic Analysis in the presentation of common themes based on the data gathered. It was carried on by reviewing the data gathered and translating them to English. Then it was followed by grouping or coding of the data to form each theme. After the themes were formulated, narrative report was employed. Ethical considerations in the processing data of collection and analysis have been observed.

III. RESULTS

The following are the common themes extracted from the data gathered using thematic analysis. It highlights the various significant challenges experienced by the teacher participants including their various coping mechanisms and aspirations to address the challenges in the implementation of Modular Distance Learning during this time of crisis caused by the pandemic

Table 1
Challenges Encountered by Teachers in the New Normal

Themes/Concepts		Challenges	No. of Participants with Similar Responses n=20
1.	Problems related to Learning Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of materials in the preparation of modules and learning activity sheets (LAS)	14
	1.1. Preparation of Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of Laptop/Computer/Android Phone, bond paper, printer, ink, Xerox Machine	14
	1.2. Production of Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Digital and Printed Modules are unavailable▪ Going home late and working even during week ends	17
	1.3. Distribution of Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Unanswered modules▪ Unfinished/Incomplete answers in modules▪ Late submission of modules	9
	1.4. Retrieval of Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Evidence of dishonesty▪ Parents/Guardians answer the modules/activity sheets▪ Copying the key answers▪ Voluminous papers	8
2.	Communication Problems with Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Parents/Guardians are busy▪ Lack of gadgets among parents in remote areas	19
3.	Monitoring the Learners' Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of facilities▪ No face-to-face	10

4.	Unstable Internet Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inefficiency in the implementation ▪ Time Management 	20
5.	Lack of Available Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relevant curriculum is affected ▪ Quality education is at stake 	14

Figure 1
Coping Mechanisms Employed by Teachers in Facing the Challenges in the New Normal

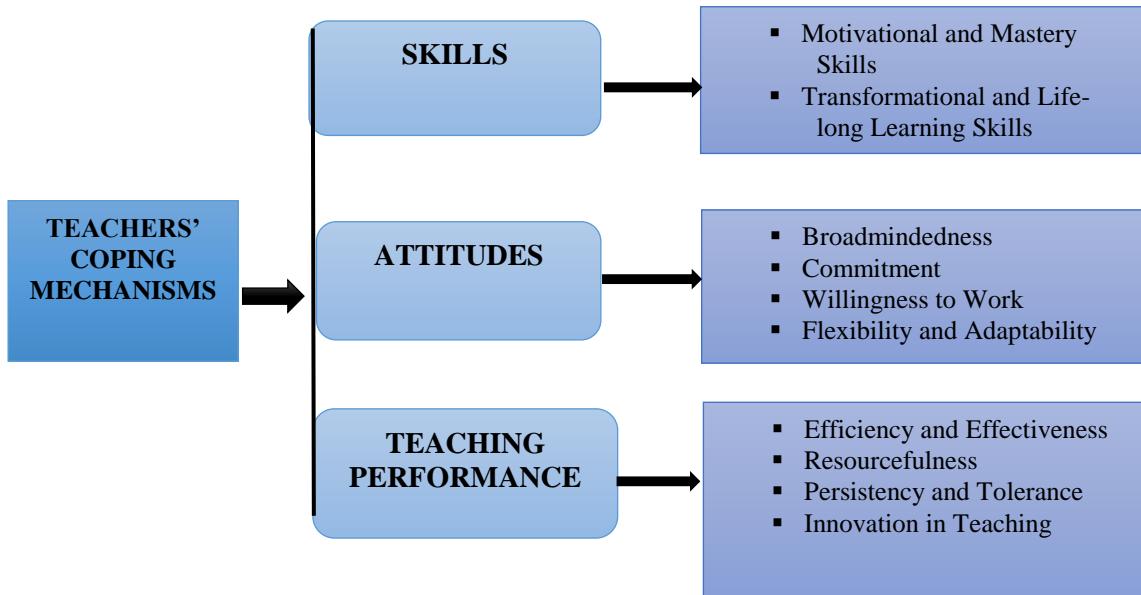
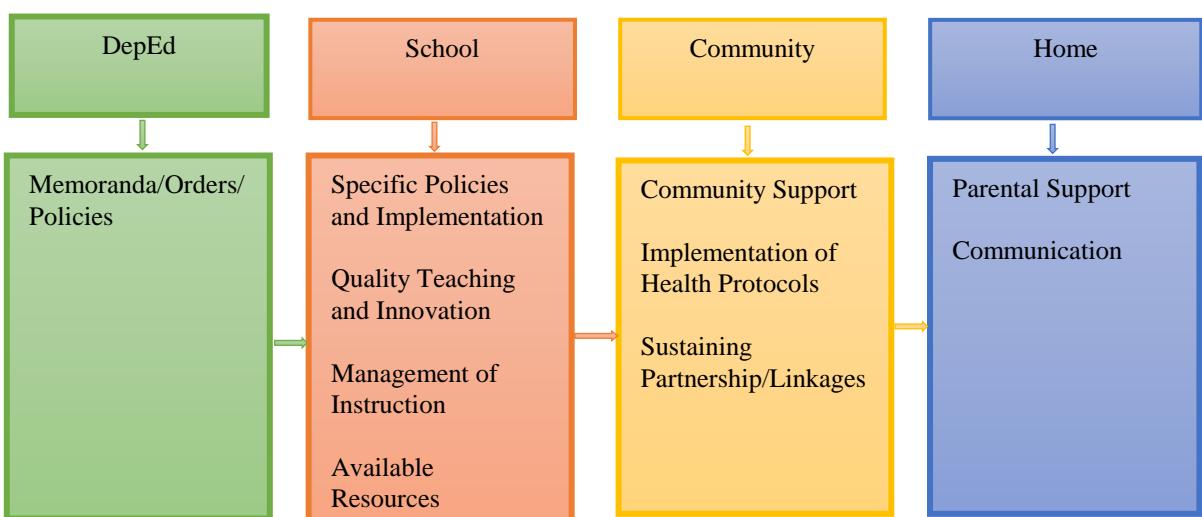


Figure 2

Aspirations of Teachers in Managing the Challenges and the Effects of the Pandemic in their Teaching Career



IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Various challenges have been encountered by the elementary school teachers in the new normal using the Distance Learning. Among these are described in the preceding paragraphs.

Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Distance Learning Modality in the New Normal: During this Pandemic, education has apparently become a shared responsibility among the stakeholders concerned – home, school, and the community. Alternative mode of learning has already become the trend which is believed to be the solution of quarantine caused by COVID-19.

Distance Learning is a type of learning delivery modality where learning takes place between the teacher and the learners who are geographically secluded from each other during the teaching-learning process (Llego, 2021). It has three learning modalities: (1) modular distance learning uses self-learning modules that are printed or in digital format; (2) online distance learning uses the Internet in downloading learning materials and uploading home works; and (3) Radio/TV based instructions to those who have no Internet connectivity (Quinones, 2020). Llego (2021) says modular distance learning refers to individualized instruction that requires learners to utilize self-learning modules (SLMs) in print or digital format/electronic copy, whichever is applicable in the context of the learner, and other learning resources like Learner's Materials, textbooks, activity sheets, study guides and other study materials. “The integration of SLMs with the alternative learning delivery modalities (modular, television-based, radio-based instruction, blended, and online) will help DepEd ensure that all learners have access to quality basic education for SY 2020-2021 with face-to-face classes still prohibited due to the public health situation,” DepEd Secretary Briones announced in a press released in July 1, 2020.

Problems Related to Learning Modules: As shown in Table 1, the teachers have experienced challenges on the implementation of modular learning modality. This is described in the preceding sections.

Preparation of Modules: Out of the 20 teacher participants, 14 of them agreed that they have experienced many challenges due to lack of available materials particularly in the preparation of modules and learning activity sheets (LAS). In a press released in July 1, 2020, the Department of Education (DepEd) Secretary Leonor Briones said effective School Year 2020-2021, DepEd had started providing Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) with the alternative learning modalities offered for various types of learners nationwide. The teacher participants said that though there have been guidelines set by DepEd in the preparation of learning modules and LAS, teachers have encountered many challenges particularly that the preparation of modules entails lots of resources such as time, materials, money, and extra effort in order to meet the requirements stipulated from the DepEd orders.

Participants 4, 8 and 9 narrated, : “*Kaming mga teachers ay kailangan maghanda ng modules at mga activities base sa aming subjects at grade levels na tinuturuan na nakapagdagdag sa aming mga gawain at kung saan pa naming hahanapin ang mga resources naming*” (Teachers are required to prepare Learning Activity Sheets (LAS) based on the subjects or grade levels being taught. Prepare modules with learning activities that have added to the teachers' task particularly in looking for relevant resources).

Production of Modules: Aside from the challenges on the preparation of modules and LAS, 14 of the teacher participants claimed they have faced difficulties in the production of modules. Based on DepEd Order No. 018, s. 2020, the development of Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) by the assigned regions, have been approved and deemed final, specifically in terms of format and content consistent with the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs). Although the materials can be downloadable, the challenge on the part of the teachers have been on the lack of available facilities and equipment adding to their burden.

Participants 5, 19, and 20 affirmed,

“*Nahihirapan talaga kami dahil sa kakulangan ng mga kinakailangang mga gamit sa pagprint ng mga SLMs*” (We have really been facing difficulties in the production of modules because of the lack of Laptop/Computer/Android Phone, bond paper, printer, ink, Xerox Machine needed in the process of production).

Participants 1 and 7 claimed,

“*Lalo na kung sabay-sabay kaming magprint, hirap din kaya kailangan naming magtiis at mag-antay para maproduce ang mga modules at mahabol naming ang schedule ng deadline*” (The problem happens when the materials should be printed simultaneously to catch the schedule and deadline, so we need to be patient). “*Dahil sabay-sabay kami sa paggamit ng printer mabagal and production. Lack of budget Kaya dinadala sa bahay ang modules yong iba ginagamit ang personal printer para makahabol deadline. Diskarte lang talaga*” (We usually use the school printer at the same time that's why the production of modules has become too slow and we lack budget; hence, others bring modules at home and use their own printer to beat the deadline).

Findings confirm the study of Dangle and Somaon (2020) who found the main challenges of the teachers that emerged were lack of school funding in the production and delivery of modules; students struggle with self-studying, and parents' lack of knowledge to academically guide their child/children.

Distribution of Modules: Seventeen out of 20 participants asserted that they have encountered challenges in terms of distributing the printed learning modules particularly when both digital and printed modules have become unavailable and when they need to conduct an overtime when the modules are ready to be distributed as per scheduled. As a result, they are usually going home late and report to work even during weekends which are supposed to be spent for their personal and family affairs.

Participant 4 emphasized: “Para po kami makahabol sa distribution, kailangan naming matapos ang proseso. Kasi marami pa pong proseso ang pagdadaanan ng modules because after printing, kailangan pang isort out at ilagay sa envelopes. Hindi po basta basta ang Gawain ng teachers at halos wala kaming tama at sapat na pahinga “(In order for us to beat the deadline of distribution, we need to finish the processing such as printing, sorting, and placing in the envelopes; hence, the tasks of the teachers are so challenging especially that we have no appropriate and adequate time to rest).

Retrieval of Modules: Among the 20 participants, nine claimed they have faced challenges on the retrieval of modules. This is due to the fact that they have encountered receiving modules with no answers from the learners. Sometimes, the modules have been answered but responses have been incomplete. The rest of the activities have not been answered. Other modules have been submitted or returned late that the teachers need to wait for all the modules to be retrieved.

Participant 16 and 18 disclosed,

“Ilan po sa mga parents ng mga learners namin ay hirap sa pagsauli ng mga modules at saka late pa bago magsubmit. Kaya wait lang kami so naaantalala ang pagcheck namin. Ang iba pinupuntahan pa sa bahay para kunin at ibalik ang mga modules instead na magcheck nauubos ang oras sa paghintay at kung minsan nagmomotor na lang para makarating sa remote areas” (Some parents can hardly return modules on time; so we need to wait for them to submit. Unfortunately, this has affected our efficiency in checking; as a result, instead of checking their modules, we usually go to their house and retrieve the modules. In remote areas, we have nothing to do but ride on a motorcycle).

Checking of Modules: Eight of the participants said they have faced challenges in terms of checking the modules submitted by the parents. Part of the responsibilities of the teachers is to ensure justice, honest and transparency in assessing the learners' performance. However, the teachers have discovered that some of the modules have been answered either by the parents or family members instead of the learners. This challenged their credibility in giving honest and fair assessment. Likewise, they found out that some parents have failed to provide guidance to their children in their academic endeavor.

Participant 3 shared,

“In some of the Modules, there is an evidence of dishonesty kasi sa sulat kamay pa lamang halata na hindi yong bata ang nagsagot sa mga modules and activity sheets. Yong iba basta na lang kinopya ang mga sagot sa key answers” (... because it is obvious that it was not the learners who answered the modules and activity sheets and others have just copied the key answers).

Participant 8 and 10 added,

“Wala kaming magawa basta sumunod lang kami order ng DepEd at para matulungan din ang mga parents para hindi na kailangan magstruggle. Pero minsan hindi rin maganda na maglagay ng key answers dahil dirito na lang nilang finifil apari ang sagot kaya nasasakrifice ang kalidad ng edukasyon dahil hindi natuto ang bata” (We cannot do anything but to follow the order of DepEd to place key answers along with the modules to assist parents in their struggles. But sometimes, it is not good to include key answers because the learners will just directly copy the answers without studying the whole contexts found in the modules; hence, quality education has been sacrificed).

Participant 12 affirmed,

“Minsan halata din naming mga teachers na kulang sa gabay ng kanilang mga magulang and mga bata dahil hindi man lang nila tinitingnan kung nasa tamang paraan ang pagsagot sa mga modules (Sometimes, it's obvious that the learners have received lack of guidance from their parents or guardians because they are unmindful on the process of answering the modules).

Communication Problems with Parents: Almost all the teacher participants claimed that they have experienced communication problems with the parents. According to them, some reasons have been the parents are too busy and most parents in the far-flung areas lack gadgets to be used in the communication process.

Monitoring the Learners' Performance: Ten of the participants claimed that they have been challenged on the lack of facilities and the observance of no face-to-face teaching and learning process. As a result, they could hardly monitor the performance of their pupils. Even faced with the challenges of health protocols, some of them conducted home visitation in order to provide necessary assistance to parents and their children in the improvement of academic performance.

Participants 3, 12, and 15 stated,

Some parents are unable to tutor their children, Marami pa rin cases na hind kaya ng mga parents magturo sa kanilang mga anak dahil illiterate sila. Parents should be the ones to assist their children (...many cases of parents' inability to tutor their children because they are illiterate).

Participant 13 and 17 affirmed,

"Kaya kailangan careful kami at sumunod sa health protocols para lamang masundan namin ang mga bata sa kanilang mga tahanan lalo na sa mga parents na hindi sumusunod, inaasist naming at sisupervise para lamang maimprob ang performance n gaming mga learners" (We need to carefully follow the health protocols in order to follow-up and monitor the performance of our learners and to assist parents in supervising their children in their academic performance).

Unstable Internet Connectivity: All the teacher participants have totally agreed that they have been challenged due to unstable internet connectivity. They felt they have shown inefficiency in the implementation of modular instruction. According to the teachers, their time management has been badly affected.

Lack of Available Resources: Fourteen of the participants have asserted that the lack of available resources has been one of the challenging experiences they have encountered in the implementation of modular learning modality. They claimed relevant curriculum has been affected and quality education has become at stake.

Coping Mechanisms Employed by Teachers in Facing the Challenges in the New Normal: Several coping mechanisms have been employed by the teachers in overcoming the challenges they have experienced in utilizing the modular instruction amidst the pandemic. As summarized in Figure 1, the teachers' coping mechanisms are categorized into three variables namely: (1) skills, (2) attitudes, and (3) teaching performance. Under skillful mechanism, it involves the application of the concepts of motivational and mastery skills as well as the principles of transformational and lifelong learning skills as coping mechanisms. Moreover, under attitudinal mechanism, it involves the principles of broadmindedness, commitment, willingness to work, and flexibility and adaptability. In addition, in terms of teaching performance, five themes have been drawn. These include efficiency and effectiveness, resourcefulness, persistency and tolerance, and innovation in teaching.

Aspirations of Teachers in Managing the Challenges and the Effects of the Pandemic in their Teaching Career: Figure 2 shows the different themes extracted based on the responses of the participants in view of their aspirations in managing the challenges and effects of the pandemic in relation to their teaching career. These include the collaborative effort among the stakeholders such as the Department of Education, school, community and the home. Each has its own roles to play. The interrelationship of these four variables is inseparable which indicates that all of them need to perform their roles to effectively manage the challenges and effects of the pandemic in the implementation of distance learning specifically the modular learning modality. The teacher participants shared their aspirations that the collaborative efforts of all the identified variables can be beneficial in combatting the challenges brought about by the pandemic in the implementation of the modular instruction.

Participant 2 declared,

"Ang winiwish ko lang bilang teacher ay sana lahat ng mga stakeholders ay sama-sama sa paggawa ng kanilang mga tungkulin upang mapaunlad ang kalidad ng edukasyon. Kahit pandemic ay masasabi natin na ang mga learners ay may natututunan pa rin (My aspiration as a teacher is for the unified effort of all concerned stakeholders in order to continue improving the quality of education despite the pandemic, the learners continue to learn). According to the teacher participants, the DepEd is responsible in providing relevant orders, memoranda, policies and procedures to ensure the smooth direction of the program. Also, the school is responsible in creating specific policies and implementing procedures suitable to the needs and demands of the learners as the focus of education. Quality teaching and innovation are being encouraged to ensure the attainment of excellence and quality education in the new normal. Under the guidance and supervision of the school heads,

instruction is being managed effectively with the cooperation of the teachers. The school needs to strive in the provision of available resources to sustain the best curriculum practices of the school. Likewise, the community needs to provide strong support to the implementation of the school policies, programs and projects. Implementation of health protocols as well as sustaining partnership and linkages are indispensable for the efficient realization of the vision, mission, goals and objectives of the school. The most important among the variables is the active involvement of the home because education begins at home and the first teachers are the parents. Strong parental support and communication are vital in the achievement of quality education even in the new normal condition.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in the implementation of modular learning modality in the new normal. Emerging themes were derived related to challenges, coping mechanisms and aspirations of teachers. Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn. Five major themes emerged in relation to the challenges faced by the teachers in the implementation of modular instruction during the pandemic. These include: (a) problems related to learning modules that include the preparation, production, distribution, retrieval and checking; (b) communication problems with parents; (c) monitoring the learners' performance; (d) unstable internet connectivity; and (e) lack of available resources. Three major categorical concepts have been identified in the coping mechanisms employed by the teachers. These are classified into three variables namely, (a) skills such as motivational, mastery, transformational and life-long learning; (b) attitudes such as broadmindedness, commitment, willingness to work and flexibility and adaptability; and (c) teaching performance which involves efficiency and effectiveness, resourcefulness, persistency and tolerance, and innovation in teaching. Four variables have come into play based on the teachers' aspirations in the implementation of modular instruction in the new normal. Among these are: (a) Department of Education – the policy making body; (b) School – responsible in the implementation process; (c) community – the arm of the school; and (d) home – the recipient of education. All these variables are under the guidance of the spirit of collaboration and interdependence in order to sustain quality education even in the midst of the pandemic. Though the core themes that have been identified are vital for surviving the challenges in the educational system brought about by the new normal, there are limitations of this study and some significant points may be considered for future studies, which are: (1) teachers may be required to conduct action research and continue improving their teaching skills and create innovations to meet the rapid changes and help improve the educational system; (2) the school heads may strengthen the merit system and encourage teachers to keep improving their teaching strategies suitable to the demands of the Age of Technology and Information; and (3) the parents and community may be motivated to perform their duties and responsibilities by constant communication and improving their extent of partnership or participation to school activities particularly in the new normal education.

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